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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 000063

STATE FOR AF/W, AF/EX AND INR/AA
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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SNAR NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: SURGEON, ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTIVIST TAKES
OVER AS COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH IN CROSS RIVER

Classified By: Consul General Donna Blair, Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Edet Ikpi, Commissioner of Health in Cross River State, who is a practicing surgeon and former head of the Zero Corruption Coalition, told PolOff on January 13 that he has embarked on a campaign to introduce transparency, accountability and service delivery in his department. As a first step, he eliminated the right of his ministry to award hospital contracts and instituted transparent procedures which hospital administrators, who are now tasked with contracting, must follow. Ikpi is in the process of establishing a data bank with bio-data on every person receiving a salary or benefits from his ministry with the goal of eliminating duplication and fraud and to ensure appropriate compensation for service. He has initiated a planning process designed to make health policy independent of the political process which will provide complete transparency of goals, funding and responsibilities, enabling monitoring and establishing accountability. He has promised Governor Liyel Imoke (Peoples' Democratic Party - PDP), to increase salaries for health care professionals without increasing overall expenditure for salaries and wages. Ikpi claims he has Imoke's full-backing and identified his greatest challenge as inspiring a spirit of public service in his staff. Ikpi has made a good start, laying the ground-work within his ministry for future success. However, that success will depend on continued backing from Governor Imoke and on effectively creating a culture of public service inside his ministry. End Summary.

Anti-Corruption Campaign In Commission

¶2. (C) Edet Ikpi was appointed Health Commissioner in the re-constituted government of Liyel Imoke following Imoke's re-election on August 23, 2008. Prior to his appointment, Ikpi worked as an urologist and surgeon; for the last six years he has provided free medical services to the General Hospital in Calabar one day a week. Ikpi also headed the Cross River Branch of the Zero Corruption Coalition. Asked if he did not fear he would lose his reputation for fighting corruption by joining the Imoke government, Ikpi told PolOff January 13 that if he could bring free primary care to all pregnant women and infants in Cross River State he did not care about his reputation. Ikpi said he set two conditions for his appointment: continuing his surgery one day a week and the right to speak candidly; Imoke agreed to both conditions without reservation, he said. Ikpi believes that Imoke is committed to delivering on his promise of providing

services to rural communities that have been neglected in the past. Ikpi claims that Imoke inherited from his predecessor prestige projects such as the Free Trade Zone at Tinapa; while Imoke will not halt these projects he is not providing them with additional state funding. Ikpi said his personal goal is to prove that Nigerian government can deliver services and operate free of corruption.

Transparency in Procurement and Pay

3 (C) Ikpi identified transparency in procurement and pay as two key elements for achieving his goal. As a first step, he eliminated the right of the ministry to award contracts for work to be performed at hospitals, devolving this authority to the hospital administrators but at the same time instituting transparent procedures which they are required to follow. He is currently in the process of establishing a databank with bio-data of all persons receiving salaries, bonuses and various other payments from the ministry of health. The databank is designed to eliminate duplication and abuse in the form of fictional recipients or payments that are not related to qualified services in the health field. Ikpi has promised Governor Imoke to increase the remuneration of genuine health care professionals without increasing the overall budget for compensation. Ikpi stressed that poor salaries is a major factor contributing to the overall shortage of health care professionals and to the low quality of health care currently available.

Planning Removed from Political Arena

¶4. (C) Ikpi argued that with proper primary/preventive health care, 60 per cent of all health care problems could be eliminated. Because primary care is the responsibility of the Local Government Areas (LGAs), however, his only means of influencing development at this level is through the creation of a "Primary Health Care Council," which he chairs, and which is in the process of developing a health care plan for the entire state with specific objectives, time-frames and budgets. Using this plan, Ikpi believes he will be able to monitor developments closely and hold LGAs accountable. Ikpi plans to make the plan public so that "every doctor can hold the LGA, State or hospital responsible" for meeting objectives. The plan will have the added benefit of discrete budgets that enable priorities to be set and selected projects to be completed even if budget constraints make it impossible to realize the entire plan. Equally important, Ikpi said, is that once the governor has approved his plan, he will have a clear mandate for his entire program and will not need to reapply to the governor for each individual item on his agenda; this will largely eliminate the political influences on health care planning and budgets going forward.

Inspiring a Spirit of Public Service

¶5. (C) Ikpi said that to date his greatest challenge has been inspiring his staff with a spirit of public service. On taking office he found a staff that shirked responsibility, did not work together as a team and took no pride in their work. Lack of identification with their job and demotivation was evidenced, he said, by the fact that employees often left their offices at three or three-thirty in the afternoon. Ikpi says he has tried to convince his staff that their greatest job security will come from serving the people. He claims that he has turned attitudes around by showing his staff respect and listening to their opinions, even when they are wrong. He says that his staff has started to talk about "we" and to work until seven-thirty or later at night. He believes that his staff is also starting to measure their success not with their titles or possessions but on the basis of what they achieve for the people of Cross River State.

¶6. (C) Comment: Although many observers complain about the current state of health services, Ikpi has only been in office six months and appears to be laying sound foundations

for future work. By eliminating contract and payroll fraud, Ikpi can stop the hemorrhaging of State funds and start using the available resources to provide real services for the people of Cross River State. If he succeeds in increasing the salary of those actually providing health care, he will significantly increase morale and so service in this sector. If Ikpi is successful his work could, as he would like, become a model for the rest of Nigeria. However, his success depends on continued backing from Imoke and on effectively creating a culture of public service inside his ministry.

¶7. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Abuja.

BLAIR